

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**REPORTING FROM QATAR, THIS IS AL-JAZEERA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Since the arrival of Al-Jazeera in late 1996, western style news programming such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and U.S. Cable News Network has fallen out of favor with the Arabic street because it does not appeal or speak to their cultural sensitivities. The satellite news station, Al-Jazeera, is the choice news outlet to nearly 40 million people residing in the Arab world, particularly since the service is free to anyone in the Middle East in possession of a satellite dish. This paper compares how Al-Jazeera reports news events, particularly in Iraq and in Afghanistan, to how the U.S. news media reports the same story. Selected news vignettes examine the facts of the stories and draw conclusions to Al-Jazeera's motives and the effects of its reporting on U.S. military operations in Iraq.



## REPORTING FROM QATAR, THIS IS AL-JAZEERA

“Reporting from Qatar, this is Al-Jazeera.” The station identification is continually heard each day in the smoky shee-shas, hookah bars, coffee houses, cafés, or Arab living rooms throughout all 22 nations in the Middle East. This distinctly Arabic 24 hours per day, seven days a week television news station also reaches most countries in Europe, as well as the United States and Canada, as satellite companies throughout the world continue to expand services to include Al-Jazeera in their broadcast schedule.

Since it began to broadcast in November 1996, the former Qatari state-run turned independent pan-Arabic station has been characterized by noted political cartoonist, Ahmed Toughan, as “the big voice from a tiny country.”<sup>1</sup> The big voice, Al-Jazeera, speaks directly to the man and woman on the Muslim and Arab street. The tiny Gulf peninsula country, Qatar, through the vision of the new Emir, subsequently defined the term “Arab street” through the use of satellite television and consequently gained international recognition. Al-Jazeera appealed to the Arab and Muslim populace as it said what many were already thinking but were not allowed to hear due to the predominance of state-controlled media in the Middle East. Moreover, it turned the boring and mundane Middle Eastern state controlled media apparatus on its head for reporting on taboo subjects never before addressed in the Arab media. Indeed, Al-Jazeera’s unprecedented style changed the complexion of news reporting in the Middle East and promoted the hypothesis of a free and open press in a previously censored and controlled region of the world.

Al-Jazeera also sparked the concept of a public debate played on the Arab street via satellite airwaves and struck down the notion that an independent Arab news network could not survive and flourish in the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> Noted *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author Thomas Friedman referred to Al-Jazeera as a “beacon of freedom and the biggest media phenomenon to hit the Arab world.”<sup>3</sup> Almost overnight, Al-Jazeera became a lightning rod for controversy due to unfiltered editorial opinions levied against many of the policies enforced by most Middle Eastern countries. It also received admonishments from Middle Eastern countries during Operation Desert Fox and the second Palestinian intifada for openly attacking countries that Al-Jazeera deemed were less than committed to the Arabic cause. The U.S. and British governments outwardly rebuked Al-Jazeera for its negative style of reporting at the beginning of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. During an interview with *Face the Nation* after the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to

Al-Jazeera as “not a perfect instrument of communication [and] obviously is a part of Iraqi Propaganda.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite differences in opinion by many Middle Eastern nations and by the United States and British governments, Al-Jazeera reaches approximately 40 million viewers in the Middle East and another 15 million viewers throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> In April 2003, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Al-Jazeera had approximately 300,000 viewers in the United States. This number is expected to increase as more satellite and cable companies continue to expand services.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Jazeera will launch a sister channel, Al-Jazeera International, which will report stories in English in March 2006. The international program is expected to top nearly 50 million viewers upon its inaugural debut. Al Jazeera International recently signed award winning and veteran British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interviewer Sir David Frost to anchor the news programs and added internationally known Riz Khan, formerly of the BBC and Cable News Network (CNN), to their broadcast lineup. These high-profile television journalists will likely add credibility to an organization in search of a wider audience. It is anticipated that broadcast options in either Arabic or English will bring the daily viewer total to nearly 100 million people throughout the world.

This paper compares how Al-Jazeera reports news events, particularly in Iraq and in Afghanistan, to how the U.S. news media reports the same story. How did this small station grow to such importance in the Middle-East? Selected news vignettes examine the facts of the stories and draw conclusions to Al-Jazeera’s motives and the effects of its reporting on U.S. military operations in Iraq. The intent is to use examples of reporting by both Al-Jazeera and Western media sources, compare the differences, and touch on the cultural as well as strategic influences of how messages are shaping the War of ideas or information campaign. Suggestions or potential ways to address this important issue are provided.

### Background

The birth of Al Jazeera can be attributed to timing and a series of unfortunate events with the BBC, a French television network, and the official decree of the Emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in February 1996. The British educated Sheik Hamad, then Crown prince or progressive to the ruling Emir, proposed the idea of updating the state run Qatari television network to a satellite capable, independent, yet distinctly Arabic, news outlet to his father Sheik Khalifa in August 1994. The ruling Emir, Sheik Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani, did not object to nor did he support the initiative to improve state-run television.

On June 27, 1995, Sheik Hamad executed a peaceful coup and seized control of the Qatari government from Sheik Khalifa who was on vacation in Geneva, Switzerland. Both a disinterest in government affairs and acts of unaccountable corruption directly led to Sheik Khalifa's removal as Qatar's Emir.<sup>7</sup> Noted Middle East media academics Mohammed El-Naway and Adel Iskander stated, "Corruption prevailed in various government sectors, and the revenues from the country's oil and natural gas [resources] were not used to improve the country's infrastructure."<sup>8</sup> Prior to the coup, Sheik Hamad received support from the other leaders of the Al Thani family, as well as the support of the leading tribal families in Qatar for a peaceful takeover. Sheik Hamad looked to turn his vision of an independent, yet state funded, news station into a reality by abolishing state controlled press censorship in Qatar in 1995. Although he orchestrated his new role as Qatar's ruling Emir and maintained autocratic control over the government, the responsibilities of office placed the Al Jazeera initiative on the backburner in mid-1995.

The demise of the BBC sponsored Arabic News channel on the Saudi Arabian owned Orbit satellite network also played a timely and advantageous role in the birth of Al-Jazeera in January 1996. Orbit Satellite Network, a pay-for-service television station established by a Saudi prince and cousin to King Fahd in 1993, operated from Rome, Italy. The purpose to base the network outside of Saudi Arabia was "to have access to European based technicians and talent and [to] avoid the kind of government interference that might arise if it were based in an Arab country."<sup>9</sup>

The original design of the Orbit-BBC ten year contract was to bring the BBC's World News Service programming to the Middle East in Arabic. "Before agreeing to supply Orbit with its Arabic language news channel, the BBC insisted the new channel should have the same values as the rest of the World Service."<sup>10</sup> The new initiative was the first of its kind, as it would showcase Arabic journalists in a non-state controlled media environment; however, the BBC would maintain editorial control of all content broadcast on Orbit satellite network. It also meant that the BBC would follow a western style line-up of programming, which was more appealing to BBC program directors than to the Arabic audience that it would ultimately serve.

On March 24, 1994, the BBC began its broadcast from its West London studios. "The Arab press wrote off the whole project from the start, dubbing it the BBC's Petrodollar Channel."<sup>11</sup> Initially, the BBC broadcasted two hours of news service per day and grew to eight hours per day by the end of 1994. The joint endeavor began to erode shortly after the service began with disagreements on both sides over program content and a charge of cultural insensitivities by Orbit. It was later revealed by the BBC that "cultural insensitivities turned out

to mean editing anything with which the Saudi royalty disagreed.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the intent to base Orbit in Rome and away from Saudi government oversight was not a valid assumption or practice in regard to the BBC produced Arabic News service.

A major blow to BBC-Orbit relations occurred when the BBC broadcasted a program hosted by the expelled Saudi dissident, Professor Mohammed Al-Mas'ari. Al Mas'ari's strong opinions against the House of Saud and desire to return the kingdom to strict Islamic rule led to his current exile in England. The program ended unexpectedly shortly after the broadcast began. The BBC immediately accused Orbit of censorship and added that it breached the original agreement. The Saudi government, incensed by Al Mas'ari's short-lived broadcast in the Kingdom, formally requested the immediate deportation of Al-Mas'ari with the British government. It also threatened to abruptly end defense contracts worth millions of pounds, which would terminate the employment of hundreds of British citizens living in Saudi Arabia if no action was taken against Al-Mas'ari. The British government sought to deport Al-Mas'ari to the Caribbean island of Dominica; however, the British courts upheld Al-Mas'ari's appeal to remain in England. The British press sharply denounced the British government for “sacrificing Al-Mas'ari's human rights on the altar of Saudi arms deals.”<sup>13</sup> In the following weeks after the mysteriously aborted Al-Mas'ari broadcast, the issue subsided and the Saudi government did not take action on their original threats. Both the BBC and Orbit went back to respective positions of bickering about program content.

The final straw occurred a few months later after the BBC decided to broadcast a documentary entitled *Death of a Principle* which chronicled:

a Saudi funeral, a Filipina who testified in an interview for having been flogged for going out with male friends and most controversially, a man about to be decapitated by a sword-wielding executioner. Although the actual moment of the beheading was not shown, filming executions is illegal under Saudi law.<sup>14</sup>

The broadcast, which focused on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, sounded the death knell of a ten year joint enterprise just 18 months into the agreement. It also marked the end of a dream for Arab journalists living in London and for Arabic viewers who briefly received an alternative to the bland and often shoddy reporting of state-run television news organizations. On April 20, 1996, the BBC's Arabic service ended on the Orbit satellite network with no offers to reconcile or restructure the agreement. “Nearly 250 Arab journalists, all of them trained by the BBC, became unemployed.”<sup>15</sup>

The timing of the BBC-Orbit demise could not have been better for Emir Sheik Hamad and Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera, although still a concept in the making as a result of the Emir's decree to develop an independent Qatari television station in February 1996, immediately hired 120



recently unemployed, BBC trained, journalists to work in Qatar. The hiring of former BBC journalists would bring structure and rigor to the reporting content of a yet to be proven concept of independent news in the Arab world. In addition to the announcement of the development of Al-Jazeera, the Qatari Council of Ministers,

appointed a seven –man board of directors for Al-Jazeera, each of whom would sit for three years. Sheik Hamad bin Thani, then a deputy minister of information, was appointed chairman. The Emir agreed with the editorial board that Al-Jazeera would be independent of his control and that if he were ever to break this pact the result would be their mass resignation.<sup>16</sup>

In order to bring his vision into reality, Emir Sheik Hamad pledged 500 million Qatar Riyals (\$137 million) as a one time funding to cover startup and running expenses for approximately five years. The newly formed board of directors estimated the network would be independently solvent after a period of five years and no longer reliant on state funds through the sale of program advertisement and exclusive video footage to other networks.

On November 1, 1996, Al Jazeera began to broadcast its all news format from its studio in Doha, Qatar. The initial broadcasts were terrestrial with limited power reaching all of Qatar and westward across the bay to Bahrain; however, the future explosion of viewers and near immediate popularity can be attributed to a piece of bad luck on the part of the French based Canal France International (CFI) television network. A CFI scheduling error, via the Saudi Arabian controlled Arab Satellite (Arabsat) Network, aired 30 minutes of a hard core pornography film on a Saturday afternoon in July 1997. "Contemporary CFI broadcast data suggested that a possible 33 million people across the Middle East could have been watching, including plenty of children expecting educational material."<sup>17</sup> The error, which assailed Islamic cultural sensitivities, ended CFI's programming contract with Arabsat, despite apologies and protests from French diplomats. It also paved the way for Al-Jazeera to purchase the lucrative CFI satellite slot and increase its daily programming from eight to 17 hours per day throughout the 22 Arab nations and to the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> The independent television station from the small state of Qatar was now positioned to seriously compete with other satellite channels in a global market. Moreover, Al-Jazeera's broadcasts were (and currently remain) free to any owner of a satellite dish who resides in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the biggest break to solidify Al-Jazeera's current standing in the Arabic world was its exclusive coverage provided from Baghdad during Operation Desert Fox in December 1998.<sup>20</sup> During Operation Desert Storm in January 1991, Arab viewers as well as viewers around the world depended on CNN to bring exclusive images of television news coverage. During Operation Desert Fox, it was Al-Jazeera that scooped the West by providing on the spot,

24 hour real time news reporting from Baghdad, Iraq to the rest of the world via footage sold to Western media outlets. More importantly, the source of the providential information originated from an Arabic news station based in the Middle East with Arabic reporters bringing the story to Arabic viewers as the events unfolded. "Al-Jazeera's graphic footage riveted Arab viewers and contributed to the massive anti-American protests that erupted across the region."<sup>21</sup> No longer was the Middle East beholden to images and reports received from a "culturally tone deaf"<sup>22</sup> Western media or limited to coverage provided by state controlled television stations. In a turnabout role, Al-Jazeera was selling exclusive video instead of purchasing video, to Western media stations. Indeed, the monopoly of Western media coverage in the Middle East had met a seemingly worthy contender in Al-Jazeera.

During the second Palestinian (or al-Aqsa) intifada which began in September 2000 in response to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to Al Haram Al Sharif, Al-Jazeera "broadcast graphic images of intense combat from the ground level and talk shows full of appeals for Arab action against Israel. That coverage consolidated Al-Jazeera's centrality to Arab political life."<sup>23</sup> Mohamed Zayani, noted scholar on the Arab media, stated that, "while Desert Fox was the first world event to give Al Jazeera regional importance, the coverage of the second intifada has given Al Jazeera a truly pan-Arab dimension."<sup>24</sup> News hungry Arab viewers personally related to Al-Jazeera's style of television journalism as it reported on the events and issues that the people most wanted to see instead of what some western broadcast programmer thought was best for the Arab or Muslim viewer. Al-Jazeera, as well as other new budding Arab satellite channels, seized the moment to mobilize the Arab street by the acute and graphic coverage of the intifada in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Mohamed Zayani added,

More than any other channel, Al Jazeera has capitalized on the importance of the Palestinian question. It has not only provided instant coverage of the events and aired detailed reports on the latest developments, shedding an unpleasant light on the practices of Israel in the Middle East, airing raw footage and images of incursions, death and demolition in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip rarely displayed by Western Media; it has also devoted many of its programs to supporting and serving the intifada, including debates, discussions, and documentaries such as *The Missing Justice* and *Palestine under Siege*.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps Yosri Fouda, Al-Jazeera's deputy executive director, summed it up best when he stated, "it makes a hell of a difference when you say it in Arabic."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it also made a difference when the reports originated from an independent and staunchly Arabic station in the Middle East.

Prior to the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, Al-Jazeera remained a relatively obscure news organization in the Western world and in the

United States. After October 7, 2001, Al-Jazeera became a household word in the West as it produced news coverage that no other news corporation could provide from Afghanistan. Al-Jazeera's rise in popularity can also be attributed to the tapes received and broadcasted from Osama Bin Laden. For its part, Al-Jazeera exclusively broadcasted the Bin Laden messages and immediately sold the footage to Western media outlets. Al-Jazeera sold video to CNN, BBC, and a host of other major Western news networks at a price of \$250,000 per three minute tape.<sup>27</sup> Al-Jazeera film technicians affixed a dialogue box in the top right-hand corner of the television screen which stated "exclusive video from Al-Jazeera" in Arabic and adorned the station's gold cartouche monogram on the bottom right hand corner of the screen to increase recognition in the West. Although the major networks added corporate logos onto the purchased video, it was Operation Enduring Freedom coverage and the signature gold cartouche monogram which made Al-Jazeera a household word in October 2001. Undeniably, all the major news outlets are beholden and scooped by one station as a result of exclusive media access within Afghanistan.

#### Reporting Bias or Responsible Journalism

Perhaps the label bias and responsible journalism can be best applied to who sends and who receives the message. Al Jazeera has been criticized for biased reporting and hailed for responsible journalism for showing the Arab side of a news story that otherwise would not be told through a western media outlet. Mohammed el-Nawawy, a noted communications scholar, referred to accusations of media bias as a matter of perception and "contextual objectivity." El Nawawy asserted, "Most networks aim to cover the news objectively, but they end up coloring it with a certain context or perspective that suits audience concerns."<sup>28</sup> It can be argued that Al Jazeera understands the cultural nature of its Arab and Muslim audience and presents news, in both content and context, which appeals to the Arab street that is not offered by western media outlets. Western media outlets can also be painted with the same brush, as most corporations select and broadcast programs based on accepted perspectives in Western culture. Mohamed Zayani, noted scholar on the Arab media stated, "It would be unfair to compare Al-Jazeera to the American media partly because the latter, much like the society they serve, have their own specificity."<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Zayani's statement can also be applied in an inversely proportional manner as Al-Jazeera's popularity is largely based on a defined specificity emanating from the Arab and Muslim street. Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi Arabian journalist noted, "Al-Jazeera has a big problem with objectivity. They must work this out. They know the taste of the Arab street, and the Arab street is anti-American."<sup>30</sup> At the beginning of Operation Iraqi

Freedom one writer commented, "While American media has focused on soldiers, tanks, and sandstorms, Arab TV has seized on dramatic and visceral images of blown up houses and mangled bodies."<sup>31</sup> Walid Al-Omary, the Al-Jazeera correspondent in the West Bank town of Rumallah stated, "To be objective in this area is not easy because we live here. We are part of the people here. And this situation belongs to us also, and we have our opinions."<sup>32</sup>

Who is right? According to Robert Thompson, professor of media and culture at Syracuse University, "Watch CNN and Al Jazeera and you'll quickly realize that everyone who tells a story tells it from a different point of view."<sup>33</sup> Although Al-Jazeera remains free of state controlled censorship of its news content, it also received accusations of inciting the Arab street through the use of hatred and misunderstanding. Perhaps as a result of misunderstanding, Al-Jazeera received many different labels to include "the "terrorist news network," "killers with cameras," "Jihad TV" "Bin Laden's Private TV channel," "a nasty little propaganda channel" and referred to as "All Osama, All the Time." The negative labels can be potentially attributed to the fact that Al-Jazeera is the only network to exclusively receive Osama Bin Laden tapes since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 and the promotion of a hostile anti-American dialogue on its talk shows.

During the first month after September 11, 2001, Al Jazeera rebroadcast excerpts from a 1998 canned interview with Saudi terrorist Osama Bin Laden dozens of times—sometimes several times a day—in which Bin Laden called on Muslims to kill Americans, Christians and Jews.<sup>34</sup>

Abdullah Ibrahim al-Haj, Al-Jazeera's assistant general manager in Qatar, prided himself by touting the station's motto was to "present the opinion and the other opinion."<sup>35</sup> Critics argue the other opinion is often drummed out by a majority of anti-American, anti-Jewish, or anti-Western guests scheduled to appear on Al-Jazeera's talk shows. For example, Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Al-aqsa intifada promoted a perspective of solidarity among the Palestinians but stirred the hostile emotions of the Arab street. Azadeh Mavani observed, "Al-Jazeera needn't go out of its way to humanize Israeli suffering, when, in their view, Palestinians receive no such treatment on American or Israeli TV."<sup>36</sup> According to Amir Taheri, noted Middle Eastern journalist, Al Jazeera successfully characterized the Al-Aqsa intifada as an issue of land and statehood as well as a struggle between the Islamic and the Judeo-Christian worlds where "viewers could easily form the impression that the Palestinians are more truly represented by Hamas and Islamic Jihad than by Yassir Arafat's beleaguered authority."<sup>37</sup> In truth, it appears as if the labels of biased reporting or responsible journalism can be concurrently applied to Al-Jazeera based on who receives the message.

### A Nature of Miscommunication

Senator Henry Hyde, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, stated “how is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has such trouble promoting a positive image of itself overseas?”<sup>38</sup> Dr. R.S. Zaharna, associate professor of communication at American University, observed the current situation is due to a cultural dance of miscommunication. Dr. Zaharna cited the current paradox “between Al-Jazeera and American public diplomacy officials relate to a hidden dance described by intercultural communications scholars John Condi and Fathi Yousef.”<sup>39</sup> The Condi-Yousef model depicts two men of different cultures, Mr. Jones, an Englishman, and Mr. Lopez, a Mexican, who misunderstand each other’s cultural, as well as physical position.

During the conversation Mr. Jones prefers to stand at arm’s length from his conversation partner, while Mr. Lopez prefers to stand much closer. Neither is aware of each other’s hidden cultural assumption about the proper distance one should observe while carrying on a conversation. So as they talk, a kind of dance ensues. As Mr. Lopez steps forward to decrease the distance between himself and his interlocutor, Mr. Jones steps back to increase the distance. Both feel awkward and uncomfortable, yet neither realizes why. In the end, Mr. Lopez calls Mr. Jones “aloof” and “cold”, while Mr. Jones complains that Mr. Lopez is “pushy” and “aggressive.” Such is the nature of miscommunication.<sup>40</sup>

Dr. Zaharna added that Western media outlets are not only dancing with two left feet but are also out of tune with the Arab street. She compared the differences in the delivery style of news reporting and the use of words, and their context as applied to Western as well as Middle Eastern culture, to promote her assertions. While a Western style of news reporting resonates well in the United States, it does not promote a positive American sentiment in the Middle East. An accepted practice of news reporting in the United States is to present the facts in a low, steady, and calm demeanor. Dr. Zaharna further noted that the American style of news reporting was largely patterned after Walter Cronkite, once known as the most trusted man in America due to his stoic and objective style of reporting notable news events ranging from the tragic story of the assassination of President Kennedy to the remarkable lunar landing by Apollo 11. “Subliminally, Cronkite represented the ideal of credibility in the broadcast news content.”<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, Al-Jazeera is more apt to use sensationalism and emotion to present a news story. “Interviewers as well as interviewees are highly vocal and emotionally expressive.”<sup>42</sup> The Arab street appears to respond to emotion instead of a less than passionate delivery of the news as this style reverberates as more ardent and credible with a Middle Eastern audience. Ibrahim Helal, editor in chief of Al-Jazeera noted, “emotions are part of the story; the soul of the news lies in emotion. Emotion is the most important fact.”<sup>43</sup>

While emotion is part of the equation of news reporting, it can be argued the use of words in one culture may ring differently in another culture. Dr. R. S. Zaharna noted, "President Bush's pronouncement that you are either with us or against us reinforced an unstated cultural dividing line between Americans on one hand, and Arabs and Muslims, on the other hand."<sup>44</sup> This line of reasoning reflected positively with most Americans after the gruesome attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> as "us" meant America and the West; however, in the Arab and Muslim world "us" may have meant other Arabs and Muslims. Dr. Zaharna observed, "These contrasting cultural assumptions of who is "us" are deep and enduring. When "us" became the "good guys" in the war against good and evil, "them" became the bad guys and even the enemy."<sup>45</sup> The distinction between us and them, which appears to be very specific by Western standards, is an issue of conflict by Middle Eastern or Arabic standards.

Mohammed el-Nawaway noted, "In this war of images and words, each side accuses the other of bias, of hiding the truth and of using loaded terms."<sup>46</sup> Words with different meanings were used by both Al-Jazeera and Western media outlets to suit their target audiences. As an example, when Al-Jazeera referred to American officials, they used the term "claim" to imply the response may mean something else or be false. In contrast, Al-Jazeera reported Iraqi officials as "saying" as a matter of reporting news events. Americans are more to the point as to what they will or will not do in the future. "In contrast, Arabs and Muslims tend to use the future tense more sparingly "in shaa Allah" is an admonition that only God knows what will happen."<sup>47</sup> Major U.S. and Western news coverage at the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom,

portrayed the military action [in Afghanistan] largely as a strike against terrorists or supporters of terrorism and as retribution for the destruction of the World Trade Center. Al-Jazeera showed victims bloodied by U.S. bombs and carried reaction from a Muslim man in Egypt who condemned the US bombing saying, "America is the maker of terrorism, and now it is now tasting its own medicine."<sup>48</sup>

In contrast, Al-Jazeera's Kabul correspondent, Thsyer Alouni

was the only foreign TV correspondent allowed to operate in Afghanistan by the Taliban. His wild-eyed reports alleging massive civilian casualties from the U.S. bombing campaign fed the Arab conspiracy mills and were picked up by CNN and other news networks. The Pentagon stated most of his claims were false.<sup>49</sup>

At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, CNN referred to troops entering Iraq as "Coalition Forces" Al-Jazeera used the term "invading Americans" or "invading forces." MSNBC's on-screen war headline was "Operation Iraqi Freedom" but Al-Jazeera's headline was "War on Iraq" as opposed to war in Iraq. An Iraqi cab driver who blew up a checkpoint at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom is labeled as a "terrorist" by U.S. networks but as a "martyr" or "freedom fighter" by Al-Jazeera.

Mohammed el-Nawawy observed,

From the American media point of view, he was a suicide bomber who killed innocent soldiers in an insidious way. From the Arab media point of view, he was resisting invading troops and is a martyr who sacrificed himself to reduce the suffering of fellow Iraqis.<sup>50</sup>

On CNN, military analysts referred to Operation Iraqi Freedom as a war of liberation. On Al-Jazeera, "The war was not an act of liberation, but of "occupation." Media analysts pointed out CNN and other Western Media outlets provided human interest stories on Soldiers or their units, while Al-Jazeera updated the war's death toll and defended its right to report on the "ugly face of war."

Delinda Hanley reported in May 2003,

There are two wars going on in Iraq, one is a gripping made for TV show starring brave US and British troops putting their lives on the line to bring freedom to oppressed Iraqis. Little blood is spilled on camera. Soldiers pass food out to starving Iraqi civilians and prisoners. Homesick and on the edge, these idealistic servicemen and women remain confident that they will soon win this just war and return to their families. The other war is waged by Iraqis, desperate to protect their homes and their ancient land against U.S. and British invaders. Bombed buildings, smoke and chaos are the backdrops for this war. Its stars are wounded and screaming Iraqi women and children, captured or terrified Iraqi and yes, U.S. and British Soldiers.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the U.S or Western news outlets, Al-Jazeera seemingly focused on the most terrifying aspects of the war. Jihad Ali Ballout, spokesman for Al-Jazeera stated, "Al-Jazeera is just trying to do its job, like everyone else covering the war in Iraq. We don't decide what our viewers should or should not see. War is innately ugly."<sup>52</sup> While Al-Jazeera brought the more distressing aspects of the war to satellite television, it did not bring all aspects of the war (as it claimed) to the Arab street.

Selected news vignettes reported by Western Media outlets and Al-Jazeera provide an insight as to the contrasted pattern of news reported on the same day. Illustrations refer to the combat effectiveness of an Iraqi Army Division, a car bombing incident in a Baghdad market place, the initiation of a northern front by U.S. Paratroopers, and the historic toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad. The following examples highlight the different aspects of selected news stories.

On Monday, March 23, 2003, Coalition forces announced the surrender of the 51<sup>st</sup> Division and its commander. Al-Jazeera's Basra correspondent interviewed the general, who said his troops were in Basra defending the city. In reality, Coalition forces had entered Basra and

rendered the 51<sup>st</sup> Division as combat ineffective. Al-Jazeera continued to broadcast the interview and officer's claim on March 23, 2003.

On Wednesday, March 26, 2003 5PM Eastern and 1AM Thursday in Baghdad, a bomb exploded in a market place. CNN's Nic Roberston reported on the chaos and anger in the district. CNN purchased video from Al-Jazeera of a burned out car and men carrying the body away from the scene in a blanket. In the backdrop, Nic Roberston stated, "The Iraqi government is saying this is an indication that coalition forces are targeting civilians." The scene changes to the Iraqi Minister of Information [in English for greater effect] saying, "They are killing innocent people." The coverage from Al-Jazeera was similar with lengthier clips on the Minister of Information briefing, interviews with Baghdad residents and more footage of Baghdad streets with a close-up shot of a puddle of blood. At no time during the story did the reporter question the bomb's "American" origin."

On Thursday, March 27, 2003, 6AM Eastern and 2PM in Baghdad, CNN reported American Paratroopers conducted a combat jump near Kirkuk to open the northern front in Iraq. On Al-Jazeera, a little Iraqi girl in a pink sweater stared out a window from her Baghdad hospital bed. Later on March 27, 2003, Al-Jazeera aired the same footage from the market bombing the day before and added images of a boy with bandaged feet in a hospital. The reporter, Diyar al-Omari, added additional images of victims lying dead in the street and warned, "this could be a sign of the ugliness of this war as opposed to what Washington said was going to be a clean war that wasn't supposed to target civilians."<sup>53</sup> Al-Jazeera did not report on the paratroop near Kirkuk or discuss the importance of opening a northern front by coalition forces at any time on March 27.

On Wednesday, April 9, 2003, most U.S. networks provided live coverage of the toppling of Saddam's statue in al Fardus square. Networks broadcasted the images of cheering Iraqi citizens and tired U.S. Soldiers for most of the day. In contrast, Al-Jazeera gave little coverage to this historic event. Instead, "Al-Jazeera conveyed the chaos of the streets, broadcasting images of people both celebrating and looting. [Al-Jazeera] also showed the anguish of Iraqi civilians: images from Basra of a wounded boy, his face partially burned off."<sup>54</sup>

While Al-Jazeera provided an approach to cover the previous list of events, it is apparent the perspective that it wished to cover was negative and did not consider the broader context of the reality of the situation was not considered. Not providing the full picture is a form of bias, as the viewer is not given a greater picture to make a self-determination of what is occurring in the broadcast. Instead, the viewer is getting a censored, less than objective point of view.



Several Middle Eastern media analysts are quick to point out the benefits, as well as the drawbacks, to the “Al-Jazeera” effect on the Arab street. Mohammed el-Nawawy observed, “in Arab eyes, Al-Jazeera is not affiliated with any specific Arab government and has not sided with any particular Arab regime. This in and of itself makes people trust the network more.”<sup>55</sup> Fouad Ajami, distinguished professor of Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University, “luridly described the station in an influential New York Times Magazine essay as a cesspool of anti-American hate that deliberately fans the flames of Muslim outrage.”<sup>56</sup> Newsweek International’s Farced Zakaria stated Al-Jazeera “fills its airwaves with crude appeals to Arab nationalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and religious fundamentalism.”<sup>57</sup> Amer Taheri noted the emergence of a new middle class in the Arab world that “is looking for an alternative to both the theo-paranoia of the Islamists and the corrupt lethargy of the ruling cliques. Taheri further observed, “the democratic left, the democratic right and the moderate center are never represented on Al-Jazeera.”<sup>58</sup>

The nature of miscommunication is a product of who sends and receives the message. “Paradoxes within one’s own culture are often overlooked while paradoxes within other cultures are glaringly obvious and demand explanation.”<sup>59</sup> Without question, there are present and future implications that must be addressed in order to “win the war of ideas” in the “Long War Against Terrorism.”

#### Strategic Implications

Noted author Max Boot recently observed, “U.S. troops in Iraq are slowly winning the war on the ground, even as they’re losing the public relations battle back home.”<sup>60</sup> Critics state the information war in Iraq and Afghanistan is being lost; however, few take the time to define what they mean by the term information war. Ironically, the call for “strategic communications” is often used improperly by policy makers; the plural “communications” refers to hardware used to send a message vice the correct term “strategic communication,” where a focused message, or set of themes, articulates a defined position to the problem.

As a result of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England directed a focus study on “Strategic Communications.” “This panel will define missions and develop doctrine for strategic communications, including public affairs, information operations and defense support to public diplomacy.”<sup>61</sup> At present, the U.S. does not possess a national strategy which outlines ends, ways, and means using all elements or instruments of national power for strategic communication. In a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld noted, “Our enemies have skillfully adapted to

fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part, we--our government, the media or our society in general—have not.”<sup>62</sup> Deputy Secretary of Defense England's recent announcement to initiate a QDR follow-up study focusing on “Strategic Communications” is a step in the right direction; however, DOD should play a part in a role that is inclusive within the larger context of the interagency process. The issue of Strategic Communication is not solely a DOD problem nor should it be limited to a DoD viewpoint or solution. Part of the current problem likely stems from well intended, yet disparate efforts by many government officials to properly convey U.S. national policy and interests in the Middle East. Dr. R. S. Zaharna observed, “the U.S. has not tailored its messages to address the [Arab or Muslim] audience's cultural and political sensibilities.”<sup>63</sup>

The U.S. State Department should take the lead in this important initiative and should turn to respected Middle Eastern scholars and journalists to bring the Arabic or Muslim perspective in the development of a National Strategy for Strategic Communication. Moreover, the strategy must focus on reaching out to the emerging middle class moderates in the Middle East through engagement with Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and other emerging satellite channels. Dr. Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland observed, “we have to help the moderates rally behind a global vision that would give hope. There is despair in the Middle East. Without hope we are not going to be able to defeat the militants.”<sup>64</sup> In the war of ideas, the militants or terrorists provide no alternative to peace and democracy in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

### Conclusion

The proliferation of satellite television service in the Middle East continues to reach nearly every household and in public meeting places. Al-Jazeera, with competition from Al-Arabiya, Abu Dhabi, and other satellite television channels, no longer holds the monopoly of viewer ratings that it once had prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. According to an Ipsos-Stat TV research poll conducted in November 2005, “Al Arabiya is the number one watched satellite news channel in Saudi Arabia and in Iraq.”<sup>65</sup> Despite the drop in viewer ratings, Al-Jazeera is still funded and remains free from editorial control by Emir Sheik Hamad. The “Al-Jazeera phenomenon” in its nearly ten years of broadcast experience continues to change the complexion of the public debate in the Arab world and maintains successful promotion to the idea that an independent news station can endure in the Middle East.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mohammed El-Naway and Adel Iskandar, *Al Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2002), 117.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed El Oifi, "Influence Without Power: Al Jazeera and the Arab Public Sphere," in *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on the New Arab Media*, ed. Mohamed Zayani, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 71. Although not a direct quote, the paraphrased comment and thoughts used came directly from this source.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* reporter and author of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, quoted in Steve Tatham, "Al Jazeera: Get Used to It, It's Not Going Away," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 131 (August 2005): no.8 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, *Face the Nation*, CBS, 23 March 2003.

<sup>5</sup> The source data of 40 million people is a best estimate based on numerous and yet conflicting numbers of aggregate viewers. Sources used to derive a conservative estimate of viewers come from the following sources: Eric Pfanner and Doreen Carvajal, "The Selling of Al Jazeera TV to an International Market," *The New York Times* (31 October 2005) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005. Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Live from Qatar: It's Jihad Television," *Insight on the News* 18 (04 March 2002): no.8 [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005. Jane Perlez and Jim Rutenberg, "U.S. Courts Network it Once Described as 'All Osama,'" *The New York Times* (20 March 2003) [database on-line], available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005. Perlez and Rutenberg quote a figure of 45 million viewers based on an unnamed source from Al-Jazeera. Peter Carlson, "In the Line of Fire; Al-Jazeera Is Covering the Conflict from Both Sides. And Both Sides are Shooting Back," *The Washington Post*, (03 April 2003) [database on-line] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Nelson, "Through al-Jazeera's Eyes—On Arab TV, Viewers Saw Statue Fall and Bloody Photos; 'It's Going to Be a New Day.'" *The Wall Street Journal* (10 April 2003) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005. There are other sources, which list U.S. numbers as low as 150,000 and more than 300,000 viewers. The actual number may be subject to further scrutiny; however, it does indicate that Al-Jazeera's number of viewers is likely to grow as more satellite and cable networks offer the service due to consumer demand. Al-Jazeera reported a slightly higher number of viewers than other newswatch sources

<sup>7</sup> El-Naway and Iskander, 72. Not a direct quote; however, the facts and dates within my precluding statements came directly from this source.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Miles, *Al Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Miles, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Tatham, "Al Jazeera: Get Used to It, It's Not Going Away," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 131 (August 2005): no.8 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Miles, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Ghareeb, "News Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment," *The Middle East Journal* 54 (Summer 2000): no.3 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005. The increase in broadcast hours, after the CFI debacle and switch to C band channel versus a lower powered Ku band channel, came from this article. Mr. Ghareeb also noted Al-Jazeera began 24 hour broadcasts on 01 February 1998. This outstanding article chronicles the growth of satellite television in the Middle East and provides an excellent overview of the role of media in the Middle East.

<sup>19</sup> Miles, 36. According to Miles, it costs about \$100 to purchase a satellite dish. Once power is applied to the dish, there is no additional fee to receive Al-Jazeera programming. Miles further points out Bedouins are no longer given jewelry as customary wedding gifts when they get married. Instead, couples receive a satellite dish, to presumably tune-in to Al Jazeera, as they move about the desert.

<sup>20</sup> Mariah Blake, "From All Sides," *Columbia Journalism Review* 43 (March/April 2005): no. 6 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Marc Lynch, "Watching al-Jazeera," *The Wilson Quarterly* 29 (Summer 2005): no.3 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Blank, "Politics and War, Iraqi Style," *Asia Times Online* (27 March 2003) [newspaper online]; available from [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/EC27Ak03.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EC27Ak03.html); Internet; accessed 10 December 2005. Blank's article takes American policy makers to task, but also makes a convincing case that western media outlets project a style that is distinctly western, which often does not resonate well in the Middle East.

<sup>23</sup> Marc Lynch, "Watching al-Jazeera," *The Wilson Quarterly* 29 (Summer 2005): no.3 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Mohamed Zayani, "Witnessing the Intifada: Al Jazeera's Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," in *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on the New Arab Media*, ed. Mohamed Zayani (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 171.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>26</sup> El-Naway and Iskander, 50.

<sup>27</sup> T. Christian Miller, "U.S. Strikes Back: Arab Satellite TV Station a Prime Battlefield in Information War," *The Los Angeles Times*, (12 October 2001) [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed el-Nawawy, "Who's 'Truth' Is Being Reported?" *Christian Science Monitor* (08 April 2003) [database on-line] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Mohamed Zayani, ed., *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on the New Arab Media* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 29.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon Waxman, "Arab TV's Strong Signal; The Al-Jazeera Network Offers News the Mideast Never Had Before, and Views That Are All Too Common," *The Washington Post* (04 December 2001) [database on-line] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>31</sup> B. Smith, "Powell Goes on Arab TV to Win Minds of Viewers," *The Chicago Sun Times* (28 March 2003) [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>32</sup> El-Naway and Iskander, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Dirk Smillie, "Whose Side Are They On?" *The New York Times* (22 September 2003) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Live from Qatar: It's Jihad Television," *Insight on the News* 18 (04 March 2002): no.8, [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Warren Richey, "Arab TV Network Plays Key, Disputed Role in Afghan War," *Christian Science Monitor* (15 October 2001) [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, "How Images of Death Became Must See TV" *Time* (29 April 2002) [database online] available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Amir Taheri, "Bin Laden's Private TV Channel," *The Wall Street Journal* (28 December 2001) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Senator Henry Hyde, "The Role of Public Diplomacy in Support of the Anti-Terrorism Campaign," Congressional Hearing, 10 October 2001. Internet; accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>39</sup> John Condon and Fathi Yousef, *Intercultural Communication* (Illinois: Bobbs Merrill, 1975), 15; quoted in Mohamed Zayani, ed., *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on the New Arab Media*, 183-4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 184

<sup>41</sup> R. S. Zaharna, "Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-Communication)," in *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on the New Arab Media*, ed. Mohamed Zayani, 193.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 194

<sup>43</sup> Michael Dobbs, "America's Arab Voice: Radio Sawa Struggles to Make Itself Heard," *The Washington Post* (24 March 2003) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>44</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-Communication)," 189.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mohammed el-Nawaway, "Who's Truth Is Being Reported."

<sup>47</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-Communication)," 190.

<sup>48</sup> Dirk Smillie, "Whose Side Are They On?"

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Live from Qatar: It's Jihad Television."

<sup>50</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-Communication)," 190.

<sup>51</sup> Delinda C. Hanley, "Two Wars in Iraq: One for U.S. Audiences, the Other for the Arabic Speaking World." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (May 2003) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Dirk Smillie, "Whose Side are They On?" Chronology of events largely taken from this source, either by direct quotation or by paraphrase.

<sup>54</sup> Rhonda Roumani, "One War, Two Channels," *Columbia Journalism Review* 42 (May/June 2003) no.1, [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskander Farag, "Behind the Scenes with Al-Jazeera" interview by Mark Pedersen, *Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs*, 15 April 2002 available from <http://www.carnegiecouncil.com>; Internet, accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Marc Lynch, "Watching Al-Jazeera."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Amir Taheri, "Bin Laden's Private TV Channel."

<sup>59</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-Communication)," 196-7.

<sup>60</sup> Max Boot, "Occupation; Winning the Peace, Quietly," *The Los Angeles Times* (07 September 2003) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Jason Sherman, "England Orders Eight QDR Spin-Off Reviews," *InsideDefense.com*, 10 January 2006, available from <http://www.insidedefense.com>; Internet, accessed 15 January 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, "War in the Information Age," *The Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2006, available from <http://www.latimes.com>; Internet, accessed 23 February 2006.

<sup>63</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "American Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World: A Strategic Communication Analysis," *Foreign Policy in Focus* Website; (November 2001), accessed 20 February 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Understanding the Challenge," *The Middle East Journal* 56 (Winter 2002) no. 1[database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 10 December 2005. Dr. Telhami makes the case, as does Amer Taheri, that Arab moderates, likely from within the middle class, needs to be reached to potentially tip the scales back towards the policy center.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Arabiya on top in Saudi, *Middle East Media and Advertising News Wire*, 19 December 2005 [database on-line]; available from LexisNexis, accessed 22 December 2005. Al-Arabiya, No. 1 for News in Iraq, *Middle East Media and Advertising News Wire*, 06 December 2005 [database on-line]; available from LexisNexis, accessed 22 December 2005. The poll numbers are based on viewer responses from 01 May through 30 June 2005.